

Why do you trust me?: The infrastructure of immutability

‘Everybody knows that the dice are loaded... Everybody knows that the fight was fixed’ - Leonard Cohen’s ‘Everybody Knows’

Why trust what I say? I could be one or many. This could be a meditative series, an instruction manual, or a piece of performance art. On the internet everything can have all meanings to all people. All is true. There is no context. It is unlikely that the person reading or writing is the closeted liberal Barlow wrote about in ‘A Declaration of Independence of Cyberspace’. For the security minded it means treating everything on the internet with mistrust. Who wrote it? Why? What context is it written for? Only the author can ever truly answer these questions, and yet the security mind has to know. Must know. Security is the scientific method on steroids. Overstepping the mark by imbuing meaning beyond observation.

And yet this is a series predicated on guiding the reader somewhere. That the journey will be worth it, and in the end something will be learned. It requires trust and/or faith, but this is security. The technology of the internet means all the essays can be constantly edited. Gaslighting the reader. I could ferment my own culture war. The colour red is vulgar colour on odd months, and virtuous on even months. The technology of the internet says it is my choice to do this... and everybody knows it. This puts me in an awkward position because anyone who reads can never be sure that I haven’t edited my work, my values constantly shape shifting. Writing for everyone until I am confronted by zealots demanding I make plain my own meaning.

Luckily there is a solution to this, the internet archive. The archive has a professed value system of *never* deleting an artefact in their possession. Everybody knows this. I can placate a lack of trust in my values, by submitting my work to their system. I can hope that the large body of evidence of how the archive acts will mean my reader will trust that the version I submit is the original, and that they can compare the copy they have with what is on the archive. ‘Trust in the gods but verify’.

But the our trust in the archive is not based on any relationship we have with its staff. I doubt most of its users will ever meet any of the archive’s staff. They will never touch the server racks. We have no reason to trust them, and yet we believe they will uphold their values. If Brewster Kahle took an electromagnet to all the digital media, and set fire to everything else, the users would rightly feel betrayed by this sudden about turn. We trust the internet archive, because a part of their operations is providing proof that they are doing what they say they are doing. The spend millions of dollars and countless hours building and maintaining the vast material infrastructure that allows them to archive the internet. We hope that the material costs and efforts that they have invested will stop them from burning their work, and the values it represents, to the ground.

I put a copy of this work on the archive so I don’t have to form a relationship with every reader. I am using the trust in the archive as an institution, and its vast material infrastructure, to say ‘These words are mine. This is what I believe in this moment. Any change to my thinking in the future will have to to grapple, and atone, for what I have said now.’ I am hoping that the readers trust in the archive will deflect any critiques of editing my work when it is politically convenient. The trust built on a petabytes of storage and large amounts of electricity consumption in order to approach the limits immutability. The security slight of hand of transforming a relational uncertainty into a material evidence.

This series of essays is a self referential project. Each step of building infrastructure around it will reveal the values of the author and provide subjects meditate on. An infrastructure that will hopefully maximise accessibility to the content and trust in the anonymous author. The hope being that these meditations will provide a framework of emancipatory security thinking. But bringing this infrastructure is an approximation of trust. I would never be able to create relations with

everyone who reads this work. Security technologies exist to deflect the uncertainty of trusting a stranger. The state, encryption, contract, all replace hope and good will with material proof.

So what does this mean for trust in emancipatory spaces? Under the status quo trust is born of carving our values into the surface of the planet. Extracting resources and maintaining the scars we make in the ground. 'You can trust me I have carved my name into rock.' The other way is seeing someone performing their values through their words and deeds, but there is always doubt. Our memory is fickle. Conversation misheard, and events misremembered. Always enough epistemological wiggle room that allows for people to turn on a dime, while claiming consistency. These days we can burn our history to the ground, with little cost. Globalisation makes ostracism moot. There will always be another community to welcome us. So we are left with fragile faith, and hope that the person is who they present themselves to be...

Emancipatory security is the maintenance of faith. We use the tools of paranoia and (mis)trust to survive as long as we can, but the moment that the tools become the replacement of faith it is no longer emancipatory.

So can you have faith in me...